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1946

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THEATRE OPENINGS

"Flamingo Road"
"He Who Gets Slapped"

Complete reviews appear in this issue

Theatre Critics' Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York newspapers

NEW YORK SUN
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK TIMES
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK NEWSPAPER PM
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN

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"He Who Gets Slapped"

PM EXCLUSIVE

MARCH 22, 1946

Kronenberger

The Dark Side Of Circus Life

PM Reviews

When the Theatre Guild produced *He Who Gets Slapped* in the early '20s it seemed impressive enough, or pessimistic enough, or perhaps just confusing enough, to be vaguely talked about as Art. I don't think that will happen this time. This time, like last, audiences may be bewildered by "what it all means," but they won't pant after enlightenment, and will accept or reject Andreyev's circus play in terms of its "theater." For a highly theatrical work it surely is; and at the Booth Wednesday night it received a highly theatrical production to boot, one which dressed up the play's emotions as flamboyantly as it dressed up the actors.

For myself, the evening began well and ended very badly. For half its length, Andreyev's multi-colored melodrama had a tingling, hopped-up excitement, a highwire exhibition of the emotions, an atmosphere of shifting lights and evocative circus music, that I found enjoyable. Garish and animated, it was all of a piece in the way it was done and overdone, acted and overacted. Its edgy circus characters were taking their places and working into their roles, keying things up for the drama that was to explode.

After that, everything started to crumble. The falsity remained without the lure. The speeches got longer and fancier and more foolish. The main character, the tormented *He* of the title, went into his big act, and things fell theatrically as flat as humanly they were always hollow. The minor characters lost their picturesqueness and wore out their welcome. In part, this cave-in may have come about from my having had too much of a not-too-good thing. But in greater part it was simply that the earlier tensions had been built up for what, when it came, seemed largely bosh and bathos.

* * *

As you may remember, Andreyev's circus piece is mainly about a distinguished man whose wife and best friend have betrayed him and who masochistically becomes a clown named Funny—and more masochistically still, a clown whom every one slaps. Embittered about love, he yet falls passionately in love with a charming little bareback rider whose disgusting Count of a "father" is selling her to a no less disgusting Baron. Rather than let this happen, Funny, in an intensely operatic finale, poisons himself and the girl.

Funny is one of those tormented souls whose air of mystery is their strength; once we learn who he is, he seems much less than he was. There is, by design, no straightforward humanity in the play, yet no symbolism worth talking about either: circuses are worlds in little, amid gay surroundings tragedy prowls, a soiled and degraded world "buys" innocence and beauty. None of this, for me, is raised beyond gloomy platitude to poetic vision. What may, indeed, prove bewildering about the play is the suggestion of big meanings that aren't there. Seen today, *He Who Gets Slapped* must pretty well stand or fall as sheer theater.

The production is deliberately high-pitched, hence hard to sustain during a whole evening. For awhile John Abbott's Count Mancini, for example, showed old-fashioned style, but it wound down into something like caricature; for awhile, Stella Adler's tense and tumultuous lion-tamer was enjoyable for its very tumultuousness, but staying all in one key, it killed itself off. To the title role Dennis King brought a certain stage presence, but no distinction or inner emotion. Susan Douglas is charming to look at as the little bareback rider; and Motley's set and costumes have a good deal of color.

—LOUIS KRONENBERGER

'HE WHO GETS SLAPPED.'

New version by Judith Guthrie of Andreyev's original play; staged by Tyrone Guthrie; settings and costumes by Motley; production under supervision of Theresa Helburn and Lawrence Langner; presented by the Theater Guild at the Booth Theater, Wednesday evening, March 20, 1946. The cast:

Tilly	Bobby Barry
Polly	John M. O'Connor
Count Mancini	John Abbott
Papa Briquet	Wolfe Barzell
Zinaida	Stella Adler
Funny	Dennis King
Jim Jackson	Russell Collins
Consuela	Rhan Douglas
Alfred Bezano	Jerome Thor
A Gentleman	Tom Rutherford
Baron Regnard	Reinhold Schunzel

Other Characters:

Housekeeper	Edith Shayne
Ringmaster	Arthur Foran
First Jockey	George Cory
Second Jockey	Tony Albert
Third Jockey	Ellis Eringer
Thomas, Head Usher	Ernest Sarracino
Equestrienne	Cynthia Blake
Tap Dancing Trio	Phil Sheridan, Paul Orton and Leatta Miller
Strong Man	Paul Alberts
Dancers	Cynthia Carlin, Letitia Fay, Ardna Scott, Jackie Jones and Elsbeth Fuller
Clowns	Michael Wyler, Joseph Singer, Carl Specht, Douglas Hudelson
Jugglers	Frank de Silva and Robin Tayler
Waiter	Frank de Silva

Journal and American

MARCH 21, 1946

He Who Gets Slapped Opens at the Booth

By ROBERT GARLAND

The slaphappy masochist who used to be known as He is back in town under the nom de circus of Funny. Which is to say that Leonid Andreyev's showy dramatization of the Pagliacco theme is at the Booth in a somewhat different English version by Judith Guthrie. This time, Dennis King is the comic-tragic exhibitionist who goes around asking for it, the goofy guy who likes to be pushed around.

Last time, it was Richard Bennett, with Helen Westley as the Zinaida who is Stella Adler, Margalo Gillmore as the Consuela who is Susan Douglas, Henry Travers as the Jim Jackson who is Russell Collins, Frank Reicher as the Count Mancini who is John Abbott and Louis Calvert as the Baron Regnard who is Reinhold Schunzel. Last time, "He Who Gets Slapped" rang not so hollow.

Maybe these days are not the days for on-stage phonies who dearly love to suffer. Maybe the Atomic Age, with a devastating war scarcely finished and a dubious peace darkening the future, is no good age for a self-conscious theatrical contraption in which a moony masochist loves an embraceable equestrienne and kills himself—and her!—because she is promised to another. "He Who Gets Slapped" may be outmoded.

Maybe it always was!

* * *

So What?

In his Year Book of the Drama for 1921-1922, Burns Mantle places "He Who Gets Slapped" fourth on his official list of 10 best plays. Above are "Anna Christie," "A Bill of Divorcement" and "Dulcy." Below are "Six Cylinder Love," "The Hero," "The Dover Road," "Ambush," "The Circle" and "The Nest." And in the order named. Such was the state of our theatre 25 years ago!

Even then, Broadway's official play-picker found "He Who Gets Slapped" "foreign in atmosphere" and "a little muddled." But he included it because it represented a section of the play-going public that was entitled to representation, whatever his personal reaction might be. Well, that still goes for me! As far as I'm concerned, "He Who Gets Slapped" remains a non-American mixup.

I don't give a hoot in 45th Street about the moony masochist, the embraceable equestrienne, the contriving count, the bestial baron, the treacherous trainer and the laugh, clown, laugh aspect of the entire Andreyevian setup. They may have meant something in 1921 or 1922. I'm sure they did. But in this first year of the Atomic Age they leave me incredible and cold.

So what? I ask them.

* * *

A La King

As the He who goes around asking for it, Dennis King indulges in a fine bravura reading of the role. I don't see how he—or anyone else, for that matter—could read it otherwise. I like him best in the first scene of the second act. Then, he is keen on underacting. Richard Bennett has small reason for turning in his grave while his current successor is holding forth on Broadway.

Susan Douglas is something for the memory book as Consuela, the embraceable equestrienne. Reinhold Schunzel is remarkably right in his projection of the bestial Baron Regnard. John Abbott's contriving Count Mancini is an un-Shakespearian Polonius. Russell Collins, having ended his star-hanging in "Carousel," is to be encouraged as Jim Jackson, head clown around the circus.

If, as programs hard by the Shubert Alley have it, Stella Adler is one of the theatre's most gifted women, she should know as well as I what's wrong with her truly Adlerian Zinaida. Tyrone Guthrie, in his imported direction, provides more movement than meaning against the Motleys' high hippodromic backgrounds . . . Living, as we are, on borrowed time, there is less to "He Who Gets Slapped" than meets the eye.

Considerably less, believe me!

DAILY NEWS

MARCH 21, 1946

'He Who Gets Slapped' Deserves The Theatre Guild's Fine Revival

By JOHN CHAPMAN

There is strength in "He Who Gets Slapped"—strength enough for it to have lived the two dozen years which have passed since a budding Theatre Guild first presented it. There is beauty, too; beauty in the play itself and in the production which the Guild gave it last night at the Booth Theatre. It is theatre, and theatre is welcome here where show business is the more common form of stage art.

Being a Laugh, Clown, Laugh tale, a version of "Pagliacci," "He Who Gets Slapped" often is theatrical. Looked at coldly, the lady who gets upset because she loves a lion and the lion won't love her seems a little silly. So, I guess, does the mysterious, well-born gentleman who joins a circus and gets laughs by having his face slapped 100 times a performance. Not exactly real, either, is the girl, who seems more like Elaine, the Lily Maid of Astolat, than she does a one-ring circus equestrienne.

A "New" Version.

But this play by Leonid Andreyev is a fantasy, and in fantasy the rules of reason do not apply. It is emotion, which has no rules, which holds the stage, and in "He" there is much that is interesting, much that is exciting and much that will arouse the softer sentiments.

The present version is by Judith Guthrie, and is new; but I do not at the moment think it is greatly different from the first one, which was done by Dr. Gregory Zilboorg, the psychiatrist. It was, in the 1922 version, somewhat awkward to have people calling a man He all the time—"Please don't, He darling." Miss Guthrie's mysterious gentleman gives himself a name, Funny, and it is handier.

The present version smooths the events into two acts, which are most admirably mounted and costumed by the Motleys. These women, the Motleys, have designed an outer segment of a permanent circus, European style, which is so real one can almost smell the lions. They have lighted it quite simply but very cleverly, so that intimate scenes can be plucked forward and the full stage thrust into the background without one being annoyed by the thought that somewhere a union electrician is pulling switces according to a written cue sheet.

Just a Fairy Tale.

Andreyev's tale is of the man who wants to become a clown and have his face slapped out of sheer unhappiness. I suppose Dr. Zilboorg's forbears called it masochism. This man, this Funny, falls in love with Consuela, the virginal equestrienne. But then, everybody loves Consuela—even a goaty old baron. When the girl's father sells her into marriage with the baron, Funny poisons her and himself. The baron shoots himself, perhaps to get to the girl in the next world ahead of the dying clown. But Funny dies in hot pursuit.

Sheer fairy tale, this, of course; but in the play the people are made to live and have emotions. They, like the setting, manage the atmosphere and spirit of a circus as well as its outer appearance. And among all those whom the Guild has assembled are some very good performers.

Best of them is, I think, John Abbott, as the frayed and filthy count who poses as the girl's father. Susan Douglas, beautiful and tiny, has the proper unearthly quality of Consuela, and Reinhold Schunzel is effectively repellent as the baron. The lady lion tamer is supposed to be overwrought, but I felt last night that Stella Adler was a little too keyed up. In the title role, Dennis King manages most of the tenderness, most of the wistful madness in the part. Tyrone Guthrie's direction is effortless and imaginative, and a number of minor players add much to the movement and feel of a circus.

New York World-Telegram

MARCH 21, 1946

'Who Gets Slapped' Deserves Same

Exhumation Only Proves It's Deader Than Ever

By Burton Rascoe

The essential, the rather awful, hollowness of that gooey and pretentious piece of decadent romantic rhetoric, "He Who Gets Slapped," was revealed in almost painfully clinical detail by the very precision and clarification of the Theater Guild's revival of the play at the Booth last night.

What was once opaque and therefore thought to be mystical is now altogether too clear for comfort. What was once mistaken for symbolism is now as plain as a pike's staff carried by a super in "Ben Hur" and about as authentic and utilitarian. The play retains a certain antiquarian interest as a particularly florid example of the fin de siecle Russian adaptation of the French literary cult of pessimism and despair. But its emotional and dramatic values, in 1946, I think, are as remote as those of "Bertha, the Beautiful Cloak Model."

Superior Production.

Physically, the production is superior to the original version, in English, offered by the Guild in 1922. The set by Motley is spacious, cluttered and realistic, whereas the original set was intimate and suggestive. The costumes are gaudy and circusy, whereas the original were harmonious and drably moody. The incidental music for jug and fife, played by two clowns, is properly plaintive and lugubrious.

Further, the revival offers an opportunity for two newcomers (to our stage) to display their acting abilities in a really magnificent manner. The first of these is Susan Douglas, a young refugee from Czechoslovakia, who mastered English well enough in two years to read vernacular parts in the radio serial, "The Aldrich Family," and who gave to the role of Consuela last night the very essence of childish innocence, pathos and petulance. The other is Reinhold Schunzel, as the Baron, who had a walk-on part as the Emperor Francis Joseph in "Marinka" and last night outshone everyone in the cast, except Miss Douglas, almost entirely by his great gift for pantomime. Indeed, he brought to the role much more than is indicated by the text and became the really tragic hero of the play, the only one of the male principals who conveyed a sense of character and personality.

Stella Adler, as the lion tamer, and Dennis King, as "He," or as he is called in new translation by Judith Guthrie, "Funny," are right in the mood, I suppose, of Andreyev's romantic balderdash and therefore are justified in playing their parts with all the hamminess they displayed last night. Miss Adler chewed the scenery gestured grimaced, writhed, staggered, screamed, snarled, wept; she was imperious, ragingly jealous, humble, daring and afraid all to a boiling degree of histrionics. Mr. King was noble, genteel and tragic almost to the point of burlesque just as the play is almost a burlesque of itself.

John Abbott played the fraudulent count as though he were rehearsing for the role of Popoff in a road company of "The Merry Widow." Tom Rutherford played the part of the repentant false friend as though he were acting in a high school auditorium. Wolfe Barzell, as Papa Briquet, was apparently overlooked by Tyrone Guthrie, the director; he therefore gave warmth and naturalness to his characterization. How Miss Douglas and Mr. Schunzel escaped the blight of the direction, I don't know.

Story of the Play.

The play tells, as you may recall of a man of genius and substance, who sought to erase his identity by joining a circus as a clown, after his best friend had appropriated his wife and had made a great literary success by stealing and vulgarizing the genius' ideas; and of how he worshipped the innocence of an illiterate bareback rider and poisoned her and himself rather than let her forsake her true love, her handsome young partner in the ring, and allow herself to be sold by her vicious foster-father to a wealthy ruin of baronic lechery. You may also recall that the baron also killed himself because the innocent child had been his only true love in a life of great and varied amorous enterprise.

"He Who Gets Slapped"—*continued*

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

MARCH 21, 1946

= By HOWARD BARNES =

Not for the Center Ring

THE Theater Guild has mounted a vintage fantasy with munificence and affection at the Booth. Leonid Andreyev's "He Who Gets Slapped" could scarcely be better served than it is in the current revival. Dennis King makes the clowning philosopher of the title heroic as well as pathetic. He is surrounded by some exceedingly able players, including new-comers to local miming. And the settings and costumes by Motley conjure up all the carnival excitement and color that made the piece notable a quarter of a century ago. What is wanting must have been wanting originally. The play itself is as confusing as it is bemusing.

• • •

It is a common complaint with fantasy. Given time to be seen in perspective, it is one which cannot be dismissed lightly. Andreyev toys with too many ideas in his celebrated play without giving them dramatic definition. His sense of showmanship was far better than his awareness of the true common denominators of human experience. "He Who Gets Suapped" still has a deal of theatrical compulsion. Even in a handsome resurrection it has litttle dramatic substance. The final scene at the Booth dates the work so definitely that one wonders why the performers did not do more scene-chewing.

• • •

To his great credit King does not overplay that melodramatic climax, in which a poison potion punctuates a fable of man's frailties, flambouyant gestures and simple faith. The star has difficulty, though, in illuminating the encounter between the self-appointed clown and the man who stole his wife and picked his brains to profit. He has rough sledding, too, with his defiance of the wicked baron who tries to buy a comely circus bareback rider. Jerome Thor, John Abbott and Susan Douglas do their best to spin the plot with him, but it is neither properly modulated nor resolved.

• • •

Miss Douglas, who is brand-new to this theater-goer, is excellent as the unwitting heroine and victim of the shenanigans. She plays her role with a sure sense of its potentialities and its hazards, making Consuela at once naive and attractive. Stella Adler brings her customary authority to the part of Zinaida, who fell in love with a lion, and Russell Collins is fine as the head clown in the circus. Tyrone Guthrie has staged the production expansively, but with considerably too much regard for the script. "He Who Gets Slapped" is an interesting period piece, but it belongs definitely to the early '20s.

The New York Times

MARCH 21, 1946

THE PLAY

By LEWIS NICHOLS

Twenty-four years after first offering it on Broadway, the Theatre Guild last evening brought back "He Who Gets Slapped." With a colorful production and acted ably by Dennis King and many more, the Leonid Andreyev play shows once again that here can be the real theatre. Tyrone Guthrie has directed as though he were staging a circus, which indeed he is, and "He Who Gets Slapped" becomes a melodrama taking place therein. Outwardly painting with broad strokes, the various artists concerned with the production do not overlook the fact that the play has other qualities. It is touching, it is sardonic, it is human. The second time around, "He Who Gets Slapped" again holds its good place in the theatre.

Andreyev's play always has been a bone for the contention of scholars. One group has seen it as mainly realism, the other as mainly allegory. The latter has read into it everything from darkest pessimism over all humanity to autobiography. In the adaptation by Judith Guthrie, and the general production, there is less emphasis on mysticism and allegory than on the story itself. In the original the name of the main character was "He"; and now it is "Funny." The change of the word has brought both the play and the person closer to earth. A second background still can be read into "He Who Gets Slapped," and no doubt there again will be arguments about it, but the production now at the Booth is clearer, more natural.

The story is of a man whose wife and best friend have proved unfaithful. Running away, he becomes a clown in a small circus, his duty that of being slapped for the amusement of the audience. He finds that in the circus all is not perfect either; the performers are frustrated, and the father of a young bareback rider is about to sell her to the highest-bidding baron. At the end he poisons her in order to save her from an inevitably wretched life and then kills himself. The characters are those of any small circus—the clowns, the lion tamer, the owner, the acrobats.

As Funny, Dennis King is giving a generally good performance, one which again emphasizes the down-to-earth version of the play. He is sardonic, soft-spoken and roaring in turn. It is a performance which stresses the outward side of the man, without too much troubling over what may be his inner thoughts and private feelings. Susan Douglas is making a Broadway debut as Consuela, the bareback rider, and it is an excellent debut from all sides. She is graceful and light and gives the picture of a wide-eyed innocent who will do what her father says chiefly through lack of character to do otherwise.

The other principal players also fill their parts well. John Abbott makes the father a vile person and Reinhold Schunzel makes another of the baron who is to get Consuela. Stella Adler is Zinaida, Wolfe Barzell the owner of the circus, Russell Collins the head clown. Each of the performers, and Mr. Guthrie in his direction, stress the action. They leap, spin in chairs; they are the circus backstage. It cannot be denied that sometimes "He Who Gets Slapped" becomes talkative, but the actors and director soon pull it across the barren spots. Motley has designed settings and costumes in keeping with clowns and trapeze artists. All is well with Papa Briquet's little circus.

The Sun

MARCH 21, 1946

The Guild's 'He Who Gets Slapped' Has Poignance, Clamor, Good Theater.

By WARD MOREHOUSE.

The New York theater, having done extraordinarily well with revivals this season, reached back into the past again last night, bringing forth a new and adroitly produced version of Leonid Andreyev's "He Who Gets Slapped," a success as done by the Theater Guild in 1922. The Guild again makes the presentation, and this time at the Booth.

"He Who Gets Slapped" is quite all right. It has been brilliantly staged by Tyrone Guthrie, who has created the mood and feeling and clamor of circus life behind scenes. And for all its occasional obscurity, the Booth's new play has poignance, vitality and theatrical effectiveness. Put the Guild's new venture down as a first-rate revival.

Or, rather, as a good production of a new version—this one by Judith Guthrie—of Andreyev's ironical play. And it's a production that brings forth a performance of variety and skill from Dennis King in the role of a cynical and bitter man, cruelly treated in his own world, betrayed by his wife and best friend, who seeks escape by casting his lot with a small French provincial circus.

This stranger, apparently a nobleman, and a person of literary achievements, in seeking to separate himself from the harsh realities of his former associations joins the circus as a clown. In the play of 1922 the man was known as He. Now he is called Funny. And Funny discovers that the circus is also full of tortured souls. He again gets caught up in the complexities of the life from which he has fled.

He falls in love with Consuela, the beautiful bareback rider, and he finds himself with only one way of stopping the girl's rascally father (by adoption) from selling her in marriage to the predatory Baron. Funny solves the problem by pouring poison into the girl's wine glass and sharing it with her.

This story of bitter frustration and the inevitability of fate is told in "He Who Gets Slapped" with all the trimmings and atmospheric hullabaloo of circus life—sound and lighting effects, off-stage music, prancing clowns, dancers and jugglers, and with costuming well done by Motley. And the Guild's cast, under Guthrie's direction, plays it well.

Dennis King plays Funny, the inscrutable aristocrat turned professional clown, as if he enjoys himself vastly—and probably for the first time this season. There is a positively delightful performance from Susan Douglas as Consuela, the innocent and bewildered little circus queen. Excellent performances are contributed by Stella Adler, as the lion tamer in love with her lions, and also the horseman; Reinhold Schunzel, as the somewhat pitiable Baron; John Abbott, as the impecunious Count Mancini; Wolfe Barzell, as the circus owner; Papa Briquet, who carries the griefs of everybody, and Tom Rutherford, as the man driven by his conscience to call upon Funny, he who gets slapped.

"He Who Gets Slapped," offering a blend of realism, fantasy and symbolism, holds up well after twenty-four years. The Guild has brought a circus into 45th street—a small one, but a good one.

New York Post

MARCH 21, 1946

'He Who Gets Slapped' Is Filled With Pessimism

By Vernon Rice

Again the Theatre Guild went to its cupboard of former successes and this time drew forth a play it had done back in 1922.

Let me quickly add the play has not been turned into a musical.

It is Leonid Andreyev's "He Who Gets Slapped," starring Dennis King, and it opened last night at the Booth.

Judith Guthrie, wife of this production's director, Tyrone Guthrie, made the English translation, though it varies little from the text of the one made by Gregory Zilboorg for the original production. Andreyev's symbolism and pessimistic philosophy are still all over the place.

The Russian writer was not too pleased with his fellowmen and it is a rather dreary and motley crew he assembled backstage of a circus in a French city during the year of 1919.

A Stranger Calls

Nothing much really happens. A stranger, obviously upper class, wanders back-stage and wants to join the circus. He is finally accepted by the owner and his wife, a lion tamer, and as he won't give his name, he suggests that he be known simply as Funny. The stranger becomes a tragic clown who is slapped for laughs.

Everybody is thoroughly maladjusted except Consuela, the bareback rider. She is too young to be anything but naive and pretty and wistful. Funny, of course, falls in love with her. She, however, has been betrothed to a lecherous old baron by her adopted father, a no-account count, if there ever was one.

Consuela, on the other hand, if she had been less naive, would have known that she was in love with Alfred, her trainer and partner, and Alfred was probably in love with her.

The lady lion tamer goes right on loving her lions.

To put them all out of their misery, Funny, on the eve of Consuela's departure to marry the baron, puts poison in her champagne at the backstage farewell party and in his as well, and the baron goes out and shoots himself. The final curtain descends.

The Guild, under the supervision of Theresa Helburn and Lawrence Langner, gave the play all the respect and attention due one of its former hits. The setting and costumes of Motley captured the tragic cheapness, tawdriness and drabness Andreyev wanted to portray. The lighting, though at times breathtakingly beautiful, enhanced this mood.

There were performances that were gems. Stella Adler's Zinaida, the lion tamer, for one. Susan Douglas, as Consuela, for another. Then there were John Abbott, as the count; Wolfe Barzell, who played Papa Briquet, the owner of the circus; Jerome Thor playing Alfred, Reinhold Schunzel as the baron, Tom Rutherfurd, Russell Collins and others, all doing excellent work.

The star, Dennis King, unfortunately, must be accused of overacting.

Tyrone Guthrie, as director, knitted it all into a unified whole.

Yet, in the face of all these things, and the play's previous success of 308 performances, I must confess, with what will probably be fatal honesty, I was left completely cold. I didn't believe the play for a minute. Nor care.

"Flamingo Road"

New York Post

MARCH 20, 1946

'Flamingo Road' Shows Why Novelists Can't Write Plays

By Vernon Rice

As playwrights, novelists generally make very good novelists.

Last night, at the Belasco, we had another excellent example of why men who write books should remain men who write books. If they yearn to see their works come to life upon a stage, they should let them that know how make the transformation from the printed page to the spoken lines.

In the novel "Flamingo Road" Robert Wilder told a tale that was as interesting as it was arresting. His exposure of the conditions and people that make up local and state politics in the South packed the punch of a newspaper expose.

In the play "Flamingo Road" Wilder, in collaboration with his wife, Sally, told practically the same story, used the same characters, setting and events, and yet it was slow moving and dull.

Every now and then a moment would come through to catch one's attention, but, for the most part, the play seemed overcrowded with expository detail, as though the writers wanted to crowd every last bit of the novel into the play. A good eye for selection and a sharp blue pencil could have been wisely put to work.

Minor Changes in Plot

There were some minor changes in the plot, but the dramatized version follows the general story outline of the novel. Titus Semple is a small-town sheriff, political czar of a certain section in Florida. He becomes ambitious to have a governor in the state mansion, and makes a poor selection for a possible candidate in a weakling deputy, Fielding Carlisle.

Carlisle has picked up a young girl from a broken-down carnival, and the sheriff gets rid of her by having the young woman sent to a woman's prison farm, while he gets Carlisle respectably married.

The girl, Lane Ballou, is not easily downed, and after her 30 days on the farm turns up in the local brothel which provides the smoke-filled rooms for the local and state politicians.

From that point on it is a battle between the sheriff and the girl, especially after she is spotted by one of the leading politicos and is set up in class and style on Flamingo Road, the town's fashionable street.

When young Carlisle takes to drink and eliminates himself as a possible governor's candidate, Sheriff Semple decides he'll run for the office and one by one he fixes those who might oppose the idea. That includes the gentleman who has settled down with the girl, Lane, in the state of unwedded bliss.

There is only one thing to do about a man like the sheriff, and so Lane does it. She shoots him.

The suddenness of the play's end and its change from the novel's (with a character suggesting that the man was shot by a person in a passing vehicle) to a happy one weakened an already none too sturdy play.

Phillip Bourneuf, as Dan Curtis, the politician who loved well but not wisely, and Will Geer, who played a minor role of the town's newspaper publisher, turned in first-rate performances.

"FLAMINGO ROAD," a play by Robert and Sally Wilder, with settings by Watson Barratt, costumes by Emeline Roche, lighting by Leo Kerz, directed by Jose Ruben and presented by Rowland Stebbins at the Belasco Theater with the following cast:

Bostright	Olvester Polk
Titus Semple	Francis J. Felton
Fielding Carlisle	Lauren Gilbert
Henry Veech	Frank McNellis
"Doc" Watterson	Will Geer
Dan Curtis	Philip Bourneuf
Dee Jackson	Paul Ford
Tate Hadley	Bernard Randall
Lute-Mae Saunders	Doris Rich
Goldie	Martha Jensen
Another "Lute-Mae" Girl	Sally Carthage
Lane Ballou	Judith Parrish
Burrell Lassen	Tom Morrison
"Red"	Marcella Markham
Matron	Hazle Burgess
Virgie	Evelyn Davis
Grocery Boy	Mahlon Neill

SYNOPSIS—Act I: Scene 1. The front porch of a small hotel in Florida. Late afternoon. Scene 2. The same. Six weeks later. Act II—Scene 1. The yard of the women's prison farm. One month later. Scene 2. A room at Lute-Mae Saunders. Two months later. Act III—Scene 1. Living room at 32 Flamingo Road. A few weeks later. Scene 2. The front porch of the Palmer House. An hour later.

The rest of the cast ranged from adequate to downright bad.

Francis J. (Happy) Felton was the sheriff, Titus Semple; Lauren Gilbert played his protege, Fielding Carlisle; Judith Parrish had the role of Lane Ballou, and Doris Rich appeared as Lute-Mae Saunders, the lady in charge of the house where all the boys went.

Rowland Stebbins was the producer, Jose Ruben the director and Watson Barratt did the atmospheric sets.

Giving a bit of play-going directions, it would be wise not to cross "Flamingo Road."

The New York Times

MARCH 20, 1946

Voided Ballot

By LEWIS NICHOLS

In "Flamingo Road," Robert and Sally Wilder have tossed off a study of Florida's politics which should cause that State to go and jump into its own canal. The boss is a fat man, the county commissioners are crooks, gubernatorial timber slivers into dypsomania and the love interest is straight out of Lulu-Mae Saunders' place, which has no player piano. With all their gropings into the depths, it is a little too bad that Mr. and Mrs. Wilder did not find a play there; that last evening's excursion to the Belasco took on the aspect of a convention seeking a platform. Set this down as the first paragraph of an impeachment, with more to follow.

The play is adapted from Mr. Wilder's novel of the same name, and it opens on Titus Semple rocking quietly on the portch of the Palmer House. Mr. Semple is the boss, and he is gross and mean. After various characters have walked across the stage, there comes before him Lane Ballou, late of a carnival. A young man being groomed for High Office gives her the eye, so Mr. Semple has her put away on a trumped-up charge. When she is released, she enters the house of Lulu-Mae, but has only one customer there, one Dan Curtis. He takes her from Lulu-Mae's and gives her a house of her own, not the same kind of a house, but one with a flower garden and Haig & Haig pinch bottle. To make an exteremly long story somewhat shorter, Miss Ballou finally overcomes Mr. Semple, no doubt saving Florida.

Mr. and Mrs. Wilder seem a bit indecisive about whether they are writing sheer melodrama, a shocker or a semi-serious note on the state of a member of the union. As it turns out, the accent is on the first two of these, but at no time is it a very firm accent. Regardless of the original plan, Boss Semple is a little more ridiculous than he is terrifying, and the fancy scene in Lulu-Mae's is more comic than impressive. "Flamingo Road" also is talkative, and it is not Northern prejudice alone which creates the urge to see the politicians fly more briskly at each other's throat, or at least get Lulu a traditional piano.

As Boss Semple, there is Francis J. Felton, the austerity of the first name and initial hiding the familiar "Happy" of the air, vaudeville and revue stage. Mr. Felton has the build for the part, but he is cursed with a cherubic face which no amount of sinister build-up can change. In short, he simply does not seem as dangerous as the part requires. Philip Bourneuf does a straight job as the man who takes Lane Ballou from the plush parlors, and Will Geer is paternal and leisurely as a local newspaper editor. Judith Parrish is fair enough as the girl, and it is to her credit she seems more at home in her own house; Laureen Gilbert is the possibility for governor who chose drink instead. As scene designer Watson Barret has a nice taste for hotel porches and houses of traditional pleasure.

PM EXCLUSIVE

MARCH 21, 1946

Kronenberger

The Plot Eats Up the Theme

PM Reviews

Robert and Sally Wilder have let a good theme slip right through their fingers in *Flamingo Road*. I haven't read Mr. Wilder's novel, from which the play was adapted. But the blundering stage piece at the Belasco seems the victim of more than "adaptation" trouble, or uninspired casting. A shapelier script and a sharper production would undoubtedly have helped; but *Flamingo Road* must even so have been wanting in solidity and impact. For it never sufficiently comes together to be indicted for falling apart. It features a chief character in need of a quite different kind of play; it goes in for a plot that takes all the sinew out of its theme.

The chief character, Titus Semple, is a fat Florida sheriff, a corrupt coldhearted small-time political terrorist who wants to be a large-scale dictator. He squelches his henchmen, smashes his opponents, and gets the drop on other political bosses—so that by the third act he is ready to swoop down on the governorship. All this, however, plays second fiddle to a bitter clash between Titus and a young carnival girl. At the outset, he orders the girl to scram out of town because she has attracted a benchman he has high ambitions for. When the girl defies him, he starts hounding her relentlessly; hounds her in and out of a reformatory and a bawdy house, and at length drives her into killing him.

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It is this story that dominates the play and pretty much destroys it. For even on its own terms it is not a very credible or exciting story. But what is worse, it lets what should be significant social drama dwindle into quite insignificant melodrama. It turns what should be an alarming political figure into far too much of an old-fashioned villain. The Wilders, moreover, do not really prepare you for the kind of play that develops; in their first act, which I thought much their best, they largely portray Titus in his proper role. And as a vicious political boss he has certainly much more to offer—something that can raise our blood pressure at the same time that it rouses our social consciences. It seems a shame that so timely a subject should have been snuffed out by so tawdry a story.

The production generally works against the play, also. A really bang-up portrayal of the sprawling, drawling, malign, crafty Titus might have given *Flamingo Road* a special, if limited, effectiveness. But Francis (Happy) Felton offers a portrait that has been thought out only up to a point; he depends on a few mannerisms that, if they seem faintly menacing at the beginning, are merely monotonous long before the end. Judith Parrish has the tough problem of making the carnival girl believable, and I do not think she does, nor quite see how she could; but she kind of holds your attention. Most of the smaller roles are conventionally played, Philip Bourneuf, as one of the politicians, giving the best account of himself.

—LOUIS KRONENBERGER

DAILY NEWS

MARCH 20, 1946

A Fat Sheriff Sprawls Along 'Flamingo Road,' And So Does the Play

By JOHN CHAPMAN

In that delight of my childhood, "The Roundup," there was a sheriff who sat disconsolately upon a box and sighed, "Nobody loves a fat man"—but he was funny. Last evening in "Flamingo Road" there appeared a fat sheriff whom nobody could possibly love. And he was not funny; he was an oily, loathsome political contriver in a modern Florida town.

This sheriff, most picturesquely portrayed by Francis J. Felton, is, perhaps, just a little too awful. He is something like Nero Wolfe, the detective, in that he does all his work sitting down; and something like the late Huey Long, I suppose, in his political greed. Although I admire the authors' conception of the character and the discovery of Mr. Felton to fit it, I found last evening that his hellish little schemes were failing to hold me. There were a good many of them, but they all had the same pattern.

Robert and Sally Wilder have adapted "Flamingo Road" from Mr. Wilder's novel of that title, and Rowland Stebbins has given it a good production with several sets by Watson Barratt. It seems to me that the Wilders have tried to get in too much of the book, going from hotel porches to bordellos and county farms to love nests without keeping their story line taut enough to keep an audience in tow.

A Girl in It, Too.

In the several little plots there is a story of a girl—a girl stranded in the sheriff's town by the collapse of a carnival. The sheriff wants her out of town and she is determined to stay. She's tired of running, she says, and wants to settle down—a premise which strikes me as wobbly. But, anyway, she sticks it out and at the end of a late evening the sheriff is removed from office by gunfire.

Judith Parrish is fresh and forthright as the girl. Lauren Gilbert, Philip Bourneuf and Will Geer are among a fairly well chosen cast, and Doris Rich plays the madam of a house of sin with gusto. Jose Ruben directed, but every time he had a chance to get things moving he'd come up against the sheriff's Florida drawl. (Mr. Felton, by the way, is new at playing villains; once he was known in musical circles as Happy Felton, the dance-band leader.)

"Flamingo Road" is, in essence, fiction. Although I do not doubt that its dirty work is very real and shockingly common, I feel that it is just sort of made up to pass the time of night. I prefer as more convincing the political monkey business of the play down the street—"State of the Union." By the way, Winston Churchill saw that one last night. He arrived with the help of two automobiles and two motorbike cops.

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New York World-Telegram

MARCH 20, 1946

'Flamingo Road' Strays Along a Vague Course

By Burton Rascoe

In trying to formulate my overall impression of "Flamingo Road," a melodrama about a sadistic political boss in a Florida town, which opened at the Belasco last night, I am insistently reminded of an old story.

A stranger in a dry community in the Southwest struck up an acquaintance with a native who offered him a drink of moonshine. He downed a hefty swallow and when the flames in his throat had subsided and his eyes had receded back into their sockets, he smacked his lips and said, "That's just right!"

"Whut you mean it's 'just right'?" asked the owner of the bottle.

"Iffen it had been enny better you wouldn't of give me none; and iffen it had been any worse it would of kilt me."

Doesn't Come Off.

If "Flamingo Road" had been any better I'd be very enthusiastic about it; if it had been any worse, I'd have to warn you against it. It is, therefore, one of those in-between sort of plays which I must very reluctantly condemn with faint praise.

Reluctantly, because it treats with high seriousness of a problem of deep concern to us all—that of the evil of political bossism, which seems to be the high price we must pay for democracy. Faintly, because, even with all the hate that Francis J. Felton was able to engender in me by his superb characterization of a fat and evil man of malignant power, I was unable to believe very much in his victims.

In short, I was interested in, but not moved by, the play. The suspense was cleverly contrived, but almost too cleverly; I was anxious to see how the story came out but I couldn't get emotionally concerned with the fate of the grafting wardheelers whom Mr. Felton as the fat sheriff, framed and ruled.

Motive Not Clear.

It is never established why Mr. Felton's viciousness was so concentrated upon a stray girl, so all the effective work Judith Parrish does in the role goes for naught. I could see no point in his persistent concern with destroying her when his goal was the governorship.

Mr. Felton tells Miss Parrish, a stranded cooch dancer in a bankrupt carnival show, to get out of town, when his weak henchman, whom he has picked for high office, takes up with her. She refuses to run away. So Mr. Felton has her fired from every job she gets, arrested on a false charge of street-walking and sent to a workprison. He pursues her when she takes refuge in a bordello and after she is taken from there and given a nice home by the least corruptible of the cogs in the political machine. He frames her protector, so she kills him. Will Geer, as the editor who opposes Mr. Felton, testifies that his dying words were that he was shot by unseen assailants in a passing car.

Mr. Felton dominates the play like some hideous and fearsome monster from a tale by Edgar Allan Poe, but the other characters are mostly cardboard in spite of the efforts of Mr. Geer, Miss Parrish, Lauren Gilbert, Boris Rich (as the bordello keeper), Olvester Polk, Paul Ford, Bernard Randall and Marcella Markham to give life to their roles. Philip Bourneuf was particularly weak in a crucial part.

The sets by Watson Barratt are superb, combining realism with artistic imagination and skillfully lighted by Leo Kerz. Jose Ruben directed.

Journal American

MARCH 20, 1946

'Flamingo Road' Opens at Belasco

By ROBERT GARLAND

To begin this negative review on a positive note of praise, I'm glad to tell you that there is still another exhibition of brave new backgrounds up on the stage of the Belasco Theatre. Where, earlier this season, Ralph Alswang did his scenic best by "Home of the Brave" and Albert Johnson did more than right by "Live Life Again," Watson Barratt has dressed up "Flamingo Road" fit, as the saying is, to kill.

His settings for Robert and Sally Wilder's adaptation of Mr. Wilder's novel are stunning. The front porch of the Palmer House in Petersburg, Fla.; the yard of the women's prison-farm outside the town; a room at Lute-Mae Saunders' home of hussies, and, to a less spectacular degree, a living room on the Flamingo Road that gives the piece its title, are, paradoxically enough, both realistic and imaginative.

And fine! At the same time, Robert and Sally Wilder's translation of Mr. Wilder's novel is not. As far as I can hear, it is a dismal and deliberately dirty attempt to out-Shaw George Bernard where the fashioning of a really "unpleasant play" is concerned. Only "Flamingo Road" lacks the social significance to give it an excuse for being. Dramatically, it is just plain poppycock.

Even that scenery doesn't save it.

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Happy Ending

This, the latest seasonable entrant in the Belasco Theatre's 1945-1946 treasure hunt, is one of those more-sinned-against-than-usual dramas in which the villain is the playwright. Or, in "Flamingo Road," the playwrights. It is Robert and Sally Wilder who pursue the unhappy heroine from sideshow to hotel, from hotel to prison, from prison to worse-than-death, from worse-than-death to premeditated murder.

Disguised as Titus Semple, the year's most persistently unpleasant character, the sadistic Wilders refuse quite flatly to let their own bad enough alone. Time after time, act after act, scene after scene, they promise Lane Ballou—such is their heroine's name—a bit of happiness, only to walk out on their given word. You're relieved when she finally does away with Titus, their relentless representative.

Unfamiliar as I am with "Flamingo Road" in library form, I have no way of telling how closely the on-stage version follows the off-stage one. Having spent an entire evening with the on-stage one, I'll never know. But I do know that, in 44th st., the story of Lane Ballou is mechanical, contrived and uninteresting. As mechanical, contrived and uninteresting as the Wilderian Titus Semple.

Any ending would be a happy one!

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Fine Scenery

It is Francis Felton who projects the Wilderian Titus Semple. And mostly from a rocking chair. That rocking chair gets him early in the evening; it is in that rocking chair he dies just before the final curtain. This is the "Happy" Felton who has been in musical comedy and on the air, has graced a podium and a burlesque show, has sung in operetta and the opera known as grand. There's a lot of him at the Belasco.

Judith Parrish is the Lane Ballou he pursues and who gets him in the end. Miss Parrish is a likely-looking young lady who suffers all evening without seeming actually to care. Maybe, even out on the prison-farm, the cosmetics by Prince Matchabelli are responsible for her disconcerting savoir-faire, savoir-vivre and courage. She is a mean shot, too, terminating Titus at two short paces.

Philip Bourneuf, who once made up like Bernard Shaw in "On the Rocks"; Will Geer, who once made up like Jeeter Lester in "Tobacco Road"; Lauren, who once made up Gentle Rosencrantz in "Hamlet", and the majority of the others are as good as they can be as less florid Floridians. And it is Evelyn Davis who, as Virgie, is directed to play a Negro maid-of-all-work as if she were a colored person. Jose Ruben is director...

With "Flamingo Road," the scenery's the thing!